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ABSTRACT

In 1991, the U.S. Congress commissioned the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement to investigate the various aspects of education reform. This digest summarizes the findings of a resulting study that focused on the effects of school reform on students at risk. The digest identifies the components of effective programs, the elements of a caring community, the characteristics of high-reliability schools, the resources necessary for implementing and maintaining effective reforms, and the implications for policy practice. Two broad conditions are typically present in schools that successfully serve at-risk students. First, the schools function as caring, cohesive communities. Second, they operate under standards similar to high-reliability organizations (HROs). HROs usually have three features: clear and widely shared goals, similarities between management structure and resource management, and professionalism. Local, within-system financial support; involved principals; material resources, and political resources are necessary for effective reform. A conclusion is that schools acting in isolation cannot ensure that at-risk students will receive a quality education. (LMI)

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ERIC DIGEST

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Education Reform and Students at Risk

By Karen Irmsher

By the year 2020, the majority of America's public school students will be living under conditions that place them at risk of educational failure. This is a projection, of course. But the trend toward ever higher percentages of poorly housed, malnourished, abused, and neglected children is inarguable.

It's a rare school that hasn't already reconfigured its offerings to provide the extra boost such students need to bolster their chances for academic success. With no substantial knowledge base for identifying consistently effective strategies, these efforts have resulted in widely varying outcomes.

In 1991, Congress sought to remedy this and other knowledge deficits by commissioning the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement to investigate various aspects of education reform. One of twelve resulting studies focused on the effects of school reform on students at risk*; this Digest encapsulates that study's findings. The study gathered information at eighteen schools that had worked successfully with at-risk youth.

The study's primary research goal was to reveal the essential mechanics of effective reforms for students at risk. Supportive subgoals included documenting incentives for, and barriers to, implementing and sustaining these reforms.

*The study's three volumes are listed under Resources.

What Are the Components of Effective Programs?

Two broad, overarching conditions are typically present in schools that successfully serve at-risk students. First, these schools function as caring, cohesive communities. Second, they operate under standards similar to high-reliability organizations (HROs).

In the schools researchers visited, a strong sense of community provided the foundation for positive change at the building level. In the most successful ones, reform decisions were made, sustained, and supported at the building, district, and state levels in ways characteristic of HROs.

Noneducational examples of HROs are air-traffic-control towers and regional-power grids. To meet the expectation of 100 percent failure-free operation, these organizations provide whatever level of support is deemed necessary to achieve this goal.

Clearly, the two concepts are interrelated. The schools that functioned as high-reliability organizations were also more successful at facilitating the development of enthusiastic learning communities.

What Makes a School a Caring Community?

Ten elements characterize adult, student, and adult-student relations in schools that function as communities: shared vision, participation, shared sense of purpose, caring, shared values, trust, incorporation of diversity, teamwork, communication, respect, and recognition.

Shared vision, purpose, and values were generally the result of mutual efforts to define common goals. Strong principals were typically good listeners who worked with staff, students, and parents to reach consensus.

Incorporation of diversity was a hallmark of all eighteen successful sites. Frequent cultural celebrations were the norm, along with strong outreach efforts to involve area families. Communication and participation were encouraged by open-door policies and open forums for discussion. Caring, trust, and teamwork generally developed as a result. Respect and frequent recognition of efforts and successes were evident, stimulating teachers and students to do their best.

A strong sense of community is difficult to achieve in very large secondary schools. Creating smaller units within larger schools is one effective first step in cultivating community in such settings.

What Are the Characteristics of High-Reliability Schools?

HROs typically have three features. With regard to *mission*, central goals are clear and widely shared. Staff members and the public believe failure to achieve core tasks would be disastrous. Because of their high rate of reliability, HROs are greatly valued. Successful schools are strongly supported by the community of adults working within the school, the surrounding community, and the district's central administration, as well as state-level decision-makers and program developers.

Similarities in *management structure* and *resource management* comprise the second set of characteristics. The management structure is a flexible hierarchy with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Administrators incorporate collegial decision-making when appropriate. Staff members at all levels are empowered to deal effectively with emergencies across as many traditional boundaries as are necessary to avoid

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failure. Standard operating procedures, based on formal, logical decision analysis, are the norm, and vigilance against failure is highly prized. Key equipment is available and well-maintained, databases are up-to-date and relevant, and fiscal priorities focus on high reliability over short-term efficiency.

Professionalism is also a critical feature. HROs rely on the professional judgment of all staff members. To this end, they stress intensive recruitment and ongoing training.

What Resources Are Needed To Implement and Maintain Effective Reforms?

Implementation is considered a long-term process, not a quick fix. The mobilization of monetary, personnel, material, and political resources is essential.

Monetary resources were diversified in all the schools studied. While all sites made use of external funds such as foundations, grants, and special state funds, no sites relied solely on these outside resources to fund reforms. These programs enjoyed local, within-system support for these programs at the school or district level.

The categorical nature of many public and private funding sources necessitated a creative, sometimes patchwork approach to project budgets. This could easily have resulted in pronounced fragmenting of programs, were it not for the full-time commitments of budget developers and program planners. Title I and state compensatory-education funds typically undergirded the participating elementary schools. In some cases, external funding was used to provide important add-ons to ongoing efforts.

When it came to personnel resources, the principal was a key player. He or she was a "believer," willing to lend support or to take credit for the program's successes. In addition, each site benefited from staff persons trained in the particular school-program approach. Other personnel involvement included paid classroom aides, parent/adult volunteers, community volunteers, extra staff time, reform-tested advisors, and new teacher pipelines (professional networks to colleges or universities).

Each school provided the needed material resources. These included reform-related instructional materials (books, supplementary reading materials, manipulatives), along with the typical array of general instructional materials. In one or two cases, computers played an increasingly expansive role, but this was not generally true. Staff at many of the sites had invested effort in creating a comfortable, attractive environment for students. Student-created artwork was often displayed prominently.

Major political resources came through affiliation with institutions of higher education and the private sector. In addition to being beneficiaries of pools of prospective new teachers, some sites received additional monetary resources and enhanced credibility through their association with colleges and universities. Several sites also forged relationships with local companies and firms. Tapping into these linkages opened a flow of fresh volunteers, generated funds designated for the purchase of equipment and supplies, and provided opportunities for students to learn job-related skills while receiving minimum wage.

What Are the Implications for Policy and Practice?

The researchers believe individual schools acting in isolation cannot ensure that at-risk students will receive a quality education. While keeping students from dropping out of school is an important goal, current standards are so varied that large numbers of high school graduates are clearly undereducated.

They state, "There is simply no way to safeguard the educational futures of students—especially students who are placed at risk—without the assurance that, as a nation, we will maintain a coordinated, coherent, and consistent program of schooling for all."

Local bureaucrats and educators must collaborate with federal and state representatives to set clear, agreed-upon goals and objectives. The authors see the current call for a reduced federal role in education as moving in the opposite direction from what is needed.

They recommend that federally funded demonstration programs and evaluations build upon ongoing state and local efforts. At the same time, statewide assessment initiatives and other reforms should build more effectively on national efforts to develop standardized profiles of student performance in various curriculum areas.

In addition to setting clear goals and aligning federal, state, and local education programs to better serve students, the authors recommend maintaining external sources of support for schoolwide programs (for example, Title I); upgrading teacher-training and staff-development programs; and fostering the development of sense of community among students and staff.

A coherent, sustained program of applied research and evaluation is also needed to discover more about the conditions that foster or cripple reforms for students at risk. Finally, all who are involved need a mechanism for disseminating research findings related to assisting at-risk students.

RESOURCES

Rossi, Robert J. *Education Reform and Students At Risk: Volume III: Synthesis and Evaluation of Previous Efforts To Improve Educational Practice and Development of Strategies for Achieving Positive Outcomes.* Studies of Education Reform. Palo Alto, California: American Institutes for Research in the Behavioral Sciences; and Baltimore, Maryland: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, 1995. 83 pages. ED 397 543.

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